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# **Family Values Reconsidered: A Response**

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## **Abstract:**

We respond to six critiques of our book *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*. Replying to Gheaus, we emphasize the limited and illustrative role given to the principle of fair equality of opportunity while, unlike Macleod, doubting that a just society could eliminate entirely the conflict between it and the family. In response to Sypnowich we clarify the ways in which our account is and is not perfectionist and, prompted by Cormier, acknowledge some lack of clarity in our views about parents' rights to shape their children's values. We sound cautionary notes about Weinstock's view that the promotion of autonomy can be left to schools, and offer a more positive take on the value of childhood than that proposed by Hannan and Leland.

**Keywords:** Family ethics; social justice; parents' rights; children's rights; childhood; equality of opportunity; education.

It is wonderful to receive so much careful attention. But it's also frustrating. Each paper poses important questions, and between them they cover a wide range of issues.

It is challenging, on such big topics, and in so few words, simultaneously to set the record straight, to identify the various objections posed by our critics, and to respond to them in a way likely to advance our collective understanding of the issues. Still, here goes.

## **The Family and equality**

In our book we, like a number of other theorists, frame the relationship between the family and justice in terms of a principle of equal opportunity. Rawls's interpretation

of fair equal opportunity requires that people with similar native talents and willingness to use them should face roughly equal prospects for attaining valuable positions and the powers and prerogatives attached to them:

The consistent application of the principle of fair opportunity requires us to view persons independently from the influences of their social position. But how far should this tendency be carried? It seems that even when fair opportunity (as it has been defined) is satisfied, the family will lead to unequal chances between individuals. Is the family to be abolished then?

His answer is that ‘taken by itself and given a certain primacy, the idea of equal opportunity inclines in this direction’ (1971, p.511). Only the invocation of his other principles prevents this counter-intuitive result.

Anca Gheaus’s paper (201x) is devoted to showing that even abolishing the family would not produce fair equality of opportunity. Colin Macleod (201x), by contrast, argues that the conflict between fair equality of opportunity and the family is less serious than we acknowledge. Both deny that fair equality of opportunity supports abolition, though in rather different ways. For Gheaus, it’s because there will be unfair inequality of opportunity even with abolition, for Macleod it’s because fair equality of opportunity can be achieved without it. We agree with Gheaus that alternative childrearing arrangements, and other forms of partiality, would continue to produce unfair inequalities of opportunity but we suspect that the latter would be considerably reduced. Macleod is right that in principle it is possible to reconcile the two, but we doubt that a just society would eliminate the conflict entirely.

It is important to see that fair equality of opportunity plays a strategic role in the exposition of our view: we employ it as the conventional example of the kind of impartial distributive principle with which familial partiality conflicts. We might have chosen other principles instead, perhaps a thoroughgoing luck egalitarianism, or a variant of prioritarianism such as the difference principle, or even a form of

sufficientarianism. All of these can make demands on parents that seem to compete with their permissions, or even their obligations, to favour their children rather than others. Our aim was to identify the kinds of partiality that can be justified specifically by appeal to the value of the parent-child relationship, and our analysis would have been the same in all these cases.

Fair equality of opportunity seemed to us the strategic choice partly because of the way the Rawlsian frame has tended to structure academic discussion and partly because of that principle's wider intuitive appeal. Our aim was to identify a set of 'relationship goods', and kinds of parent-child interaction productive of those goods, that should not be sacrificed to it despite that appeal, while arguing that the principle was important enough plausibly to constrain parents' attempts to confer advantage on their children in general. These expository benefits, for us, outweighed the principle's many defects, such as its limited specifications both of those whose opportunities should be equal and what those opportunities should be opportunities for, or the fact that our actual circumstances confront us with more urgent, impartially justified, distributive demands than those required by the principle (Brighouse and Swift 2014, pp. 38-44, 143-45).

We argue that even if abolishing the family would result in fair equality of opportunity, abolition would not be justified, because the family provides important goods that are, from the impartial perspective, more important than fair equality of opportunity. So, if abolishing the family would not – even if it could not – make equality of opportunity possible, that does not affect our argument. According to Gheaus (xxx), our analysis 'seems to rely on the assumption that, absent the family and other things being equal, there would be significantly less disruption of distributive justice'. If so, appearances are deceptive.

We make no empirical assumption of that kind. More, we do not suppose that familial partiality is the only kind of partiality that is *legitimate*, nor even that it is the kind of legitimate partiality that is, empirically, most likely to disrupt fair equality of opportunity. Our aim is to show that parent-child relationships justify less conferral of advantage than is commonly thought, and provide less by way of justified opposition to egalitarian policies than is commonly acknowledged. It is compatible with this that *other* relationships might justify extensive partiality of a kind that interfered with fair equality of opportunity, and that justified resistance to egalitarian policies. To investigate whether other forms of relationship, such as friendship or compatriotism or co-religiosity, would justify such interference and resistance one would need, on our approach, to consider the specificity of those relationships and think about what kinds of partiality might be defended by appeal to the goods they produce.<sup>1</sup> It is true that we, like many others, regard the familial case as generating particularly important permissions and requirements, and we are doubtful that careful examination of the goods produced by these other relationships will show their production to legitimate extensive expressions of partiality of the kind that would disrupt fair equality of opportunity – or other impartial principles. But our book does not take a stand on that, separate, question.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing in our view denies that, in the absence of the family, people would act in ways just as disruptive of fair equality of opportunity as they do in its presence. Perhaps, deprived of their ability to confer advantage on their children, people might be even more keenly motivated to benefit their friends, their compatriots or their co-religionists. Similarly, for our (limited, specific) purposes, one does not need to know

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<sup>1</sup> Which is not to say that all partiality must be justified by appeal to relationship goods of any kind. See Brighouse and Swift (2015, pp.224-225).

<sup>2</sup> For a sketch of how an investigation of the compatriot case would go, see Brighouse and Swift (2011).

if ‘alternative childrearing institutions would be significantly less likely to disrupt fair distributions than a (properly reformed) family’ (Gheaus: xx).

When thinking about this empirical counterfactual, one must keep clear that a ‘properly reformed’ family would already be likely to be less disruptive (though not, perhaps, less likely to be disruptive) of that principle than the family as it exists at moment. (If, as Macleod and we suggest, the wider society were also subject to egalitarian reform, that would do even more to reduce the conflict.) We certainly agree with Gheaus that any system of childrearing that might plausibly serve the relevant interests at all well could not, for the reasons she gives, be expected to give all children equality of opportunity for jobs and the rewards that attach to them. There would of course be innumerable contingencies at the individual level – some adults will just be a better fit with some children – but how much inequality of opportunity could be *expected* will depend on a number of variables, particularly, perhaps, the extent of variation in the relevant adults’ child rearing capacities (which we assume would be less than between parents in even the properly reformed family), and the number of children each adult would raise over her lifetime (which we assume would be more).<sup>3</sup> Given less variation in parenting input and less exclusive attention to particular children, we hazard that a system of the kind she has in mind would tend to produce less inequality of opportunity than even a properly reformed family. It is an interesting, and different, question what kinds of partiality could be *justified* by appeal to the adult-child relationships in question. The first step in thinking about that would

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<sup>3</sup> It is an interesting issue the extent to which inequality of opportunity matters because it reflects *systematic* unfairness, and unfairness that is likely to be reproduced over generations. For some kinds of egalitarian, random variation in individuals’ upbringings might be a less objectionable source of such inequality than even the properly reformed family.

be to clarify the nature of those relationships, especially how exactly they differ from the parent-child relationship in the properly reformed family.<sup>4</sup>

Macleod is surely right that there is no necessary conflict between the family and fair equality of opportunity. One way to see this is simply to imagine a society in which children are raised in families but there is no overall inequality in the rewards, both intrinsic (e.g. self-realization) and extrinsic (e.g. income), that attach to different jobs; there would still be different jobs and children would doubtless have unequal chances of achieving them, but there would be no inequality of prospects with respect to rewards. Or suppose that jobs were unequally rewarded but people were allocated to them randomly, or by other mechanisms that rendered irrelevant the way they had been raised as children. These possibilities suffice to establish his claim, though he has in mind a different reconciliatory, less outlandish, scenario: a ‘non-hierarchical community’ in which parents are more equal with respect to childrearing ability and motivation, public institutions help to mitigate any residual inequalities in children’s competences, and a wide range of different skills are valued by society.

Macleod very nicely brings out the contingency of the empirical differences and inequalities that in fact generate the conflict between the family and fair equality

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<sup>4</sup> Even though we at no point advocate abolition - indeed the book is written as a *defence* of the family - Gheaus worries that our approach risks alienating and antagonizing readers in a way damaging to the prospects for egalitarian reform. This raises general issues about philosophers’ responsibility to anticipate how their ideas might be (mis)understood and (mis)used that we cannot address here. For what it’s worth, such opprobrium as we have received has made no reference to our mention of abolition. It has focused rather on the suggestion that parents should occasionally have in mind the way in which even entirely legitimate activities like reading bedtime stories can have the effect of leaving other children at an unfair disadvantage, which has been misunderstood as condemning parents who read such stories. When ideas are prone to that level of distortion, it is hard to see what would be gained by more extensive attention to the possibilities of polemical misrepresentation. Those interested in the opprobrium can find out about it at Crooked Timber (<http://crookedtimber.org/2015/05/11/rush-limbaugh-and-bedtime-stories-definitely-not-the-worst-thing-that-happened-last-week/>).

of opportunity. Where we emphasized that contingency especially with respect to children's outcomes (Brighthouse and Swift 2014, pp. 129-130), he mainly focuses on parental – and other - inputs. Still, we doubt that the family and fair equality of opportunity could be entirely reconciled in a *just* society, because we think that justice requires the permission of at least somewhat unequal inputs and outcomes. Indeed, fair equality of opportunity itself is plausibly construed as requiring that permission.<sup>5</sup> Although strictly speaking that principle is entirely negative, objecting solely to people's prospects being affected by their social class background, it is normally understood also as permitting, and on some interpretations even requiring, that those prospects indeed be influenced by their natural talents and willingness to use them. In any case, any plausible specification of the principle will leave individuals, however equal their prospects, free to make choices – about what kind of work to do, for example, or how hard to work, or how to spend their leisure time (Brighthouse and Swift 2014, p.30). At least some of those choices will properly leave them unequal, or at least different, with respect to attributes that may legitimately affect their interactions with their children in ways that it is in practice impossible to prevent from impacting somewhat on those children's prospects, if their children's own freedom to make choices, when capable of so doing, is also to be respected.

We might put it this way. Nothing about *family values* prevents the achievement of fair equality of opportunity. There is, on our view, no parental right to confer advantage, or to have parent-child interactions that are properly protected (such as bedtime stories) rewarded in a way that conflicts with that principle. It is other, more general, considerations that generate the conflict. Like Macleod, we think

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<sup>5</sup> We consider the case with respect to fair equality of opportunity itself; if justice allowed inequalities of the kind licensed by something like Rawls's difference principle, that case would be more straightforward.



that, compared both to conventional views and to the status quo in most affluent societies, the conflict between the family and fair equality of opportunity can be significantly mitigated – as indeed can the conflict between the family and other impartial distributive principles. Unlike him, we doubt that a just society could eliminate it altogether.

### **Parenting and perfectionism**

Our book tries to tread a careful line on one of the most fundamental issues in political philosophy: whether it is proper for the state to act on judgments about the content of a good life, or whether it should aim rather to provide a just framework that remains neutral between them.<sup>6</sup> Our theory as a whole certainly has mildly perfectionist elements but, as Christine Sypnowich (201x) observes, we are at pains to emphasize how much of the argument does not depend on them. From her avowedly perfectionist perspective, this looks like backsliding, and a missed opportunity: our argument ‘makes it clear that political philosophy has been impoverished for its jettisoning of questions of human flourishing’ (xx); the faces exuding wellbeing in the Norman Rockwell painting on the cover need no anti-perfectionist caveats.<sup>7</sup>

In this section we explain our reluctance to be cast as flag bearers for perfectionism, and try to clarify where perfectionist elements do indeed play a role in the argument. While we are readier to disown those elements than she would like, she is quicker to see them than we think warranted. The justification of policies aimed at

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<sup>6</sup> Here we follow Sypnowich in using ‘neutralist’ and ‘anti-perfectionist’ synonymously. There is of course a considerable literature on the relation between the two, and particularly on whether anti-perfectionism is indeed ‘neutral’. We try to sidestep that wider issue.

<sup>7</sup> In fact some readers have objected to our cover, variously because the family depicted is American, mono-ethnic, white, heterosexual, patriarchal, and carnivorous. Here we are thinking about the objection that, however wonderful the form of life shown, it is not the state’s business to be promoting it.

promoting or supporting family life is a very important topic, so it matters to have a clear picture of the structure of the issues. By setting out our version of that picture, we hope at least to enable those who disagree with us to understand where, and why, they do so.

We downplay the importance of the perfectionist strands in the argument for two reasons (Brighouse and Swift 2014, pp. 178-181). On the one hand, we don't want convinced anti-perfectionists to dismiss our views on the mistaken assumption that they are irredeemably and entirely perfectionist. Generally, whatever one's conclusions, one wants arguments that are austere, appealing to premises that are no more controversial than necessary. In so far as we can articulate a theory of the value of the family, and of its implications for policy, without appealing to judgments that some will reject outright and others will regard as inappropriate bases for political action, we would want to do that. It is a very good question exactly how much of our theory does indeed survive, as a contribution to political theory, without those bases, and one that we hope the following discussion will better enable us, and others, to answer.

On the other hand, we feel the force of neutralist considerations. Synowich thinks that our sympathetic characterization of anti-perfectionism 'caricatures' (xx) perfectionist views, but we stand by it (2014, p.178). Even a mild, pluralistic perfectionism like ours does indeed use the coercive power of the state, if only through tax and subsidy, on behalf of some ways of living rather than others, and there are various difficult questions – e.g. about the state's capacity to make those judgments well, or about what constitutes equal respect for citizens – that make us less ready than her simply to assume the propriety of perfectionist state action. The

case for neutralism is, we believe, powerful enough for us to want to show how much of our argument would continue to apply if it were valid.

Sypnowich thinks that we invoke perfectionist arguments in our case for the value of familial relationships for both children and parents (xxx). While the weighty and non-substitutable interest in parenting that we identify does indeed claim to specify an element in a flourishing life for many adults, we are not convinced that the account of children's interests to which we appeal violates an anti-perfectionist constraint. And even if our full account of why children need parents does violate it, it remains important to see that even neutralists can accept child-centred arguments for the family – and for the 'relationship goods' it produces.

We appeal to five interests of children to justify the family (and ground the child's right to a parent): four of these relate to various aspects of children's development (physical, cognitive, emotional, and moral), the fifth concerns the quality of their childhood as such (Brighouse and Swift 2014, p.64).<sup>8</sup> We shall not repeat here how the argument goes, though we will stress that the interrelationships between the interests are crucial. For current purposes, what's important is that three of these interests satisfy anti-perfectionist criteria in a very straightforward way: even neutralists can and do think it a proper task for the state to help future citizens develop their physical, cognitive and moral capacities. Emotional development is perhaps a little more controversial, but we deliberately specify it very broadly and, importantly, give no special place to the development of the capacity for distinctively *familial*

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<sup>8</sup> Sypnowich misunderstands our use of Nussbaum's list of the constituents of well-being (Brighouse and Swift 2014, p.60), which is invoked not 'to say that children have a right to parents who are best placed to provide them with these goods' (x) but simply to introduce and illustrate the idea of interests.

relationships.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps some variants of anti-perfectionism would regard even this as beyond the pale, but we suspect that more plausible versions will either accept it as appropriately neutral between conceptions of wellbeing or see it as presupposed by the kind of interest (e.g. in framing, revising and pursuing a conception of the good, or in acting on one's sense of justice) that neutralists can endorse. Childhood goods are an interesting case. In so far as they are valuable on these other developmental grounds, they too are presupposed. Where they are intrinsically valuable, the fact that anti-perfectionists are primarily concerned with people's attributes as adults leaves their status unclear to us. Perhaps it is impossible to have an anti-perfectionist understanding of a good childhood – any such understanding will rest on a fuller theory of human flourishing than the neutralist can accept. Or perhaps common sense understandings of such a childhood do not violate anti-perfectionist strictures.

Whatever one thinks about this last issue, we believe that familial relationships of the kind we describe are justified even by appeal to what we might call children's 'neutral interests'. At times Synnott seems to conflate paternalism and perfectionism, detecting exceptions to neutralism where none exist; even the resolute anti-perfectionist can recognize that children differ from adults in ways that justify the paternalistic treatment of the former but not the latter (p.x). Similarly, one should not read all talk of providing children with an upbringing that is conducive to their flourishing as betraying perfectionist leanings. On our understanding, the anti-perfectionist can hold that the state - and perhaps even parents - are properly guided by a concern that children live flourishing lives, and can act paternalistically towards that end, provided that that concern does not take a determinate view about what

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<sup>9</sup> 'Children need the education and upbringing that enables them to understand their own emotional needs and dispositions, regulate their emotional life, and connect emotionally with other people' (Brighouse and Swift 2014, p.64).

counts as flourishing. The capacity for autonomy, for example, can be an appropriate guide to political action, even to the neutralist, partly because of its connection to flourishing, if those who have it are best placed to judge wherein their own flourishing consists.

Where children's interest in being parented can, we believe, generate the case for familial relationships of the kind that we describe without violating anti-perfectionist constraints, our articulation of adults' interest in being parents does take us into avowedly perfectionist territory – at least when we argue that it can properly guide state policy. Where the rights *of* parents (a.k.a. 'parents' rights') are justified entirely by appeal to children's interests, which could be construed in neutralist terms, the right *to* parent depends on a claim about the weighty and non-substitutable contribution to adults' wellbeing made by a rather particular kind of relationship: one in which the adult acts as the child's fiduciary and successfully discharges her fiduciary duties by having an intimate-but-authoritative loving relationship with the child.<sup>10</sup> When we argue that society should support adults in their attempts to become parents, indeed when we argue that those adults who are good enough parents have an interest that defeats a child's claim to the best available parent, we are invoking a perfectionist claim about the value of parenting. *That* claim, indeed, is unusually fully specified. Not only do we, unlike (e.g.) Nussbaum, regard parenting as *sui generis* – rather than subsumable into the general category of emotional life – which might already be enough to violate some neutralist constraints; we also offer a very specific articulation of the value of parenting, and one that others have seen much to quarrel with (see, for example, Reshef 2013, and Ferracioli 2016, 2017).

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<sup>10</sup> Notice that this is more determinate and specific than the interest in connecting emotionally with other people that we regard as among those developmental interests of children that it is parents' duty to protect and promote.

As in our previous remarks, it is important, however, to see that the case for regarding familial relationship goods as *distribuenda*, and for advocating policies – flexible working arrangements, home visits, even workshops on reading bedtime stories (x) – aiming at their more equal distribution does not depend entirely on adults’ interest in parenting, or in parenting well. Certainly, we believe that those interests may legitimately be taken into account by policymakers, but we would be disappointed if readers came away with the impression that they play a crucial role in that strand of our argument. Policies of that kind can often be justified by appeal to children’s ‘neutral’ interests. To parent is to play a fiduciary role for one’s children; to parent well is to do that well. The case for more equal distributions of familial relationship goods, or indeed for distributions meeting sufficientarian desiderata, depends primarily on the claims of *children*. We could, to be sure, formulate the case in terms of the distribution of opportunities for flourishing, as Sypnowich urges us to, but we have suggested that doing so need involve no perfectionist commitments. Claims in favour of state support for artificial reproductive technology, or of giving adults’ interests any weight in the design of adoption policies, are different. Those do appeal to a specific view about adult wellbeing of the kind that she would like to see more of.

### **Sharing and shaping values**

In *Family Values* we tackle the question of the extent to which parents may legitimately share their values with, and shape the values of, their children. This is obviously an area where the will of parents and the interests of children are potentially in conflict. We argue that, for several familiar reasons, children have an interest in becoming autonomous adults – equipped with the intellectual and

emotional resources to make and, over time, rationally to revise, considered and careful judgments about what values should guide their lives, and about what to do in particular circumstances. Society has an interest in children being constrained not only by the law but by internalized dispositions to treat others justly, honestly and with respect. But parents normally seek, and may well have an interest in, sharing their lives with their children, in ways that inevitably end up shaping those children's values. Shaping values while fostering autonomy is not necessarily impossible, but it certainly creates a potential for tension.

Daniel Weinstock (201x) observes that the subtitle of our book is 'The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships' and argues that we also need a *political philosophy* of parent-child relationships. Social institutions that supplement the family can address the tensions between the parental will to shape values and the child's interest in autonomy; schools in particular should play a major role in fostering autonomy. Andrée-Anne Cormier's paper (201x) also concerns this conflict. Whereas Sypnowich urges us to be more, or more openly, perfectionist, Cormier pursues a version of the argumentative strategy suggested above: parents' deliberately shaping their children's values in the light of their comprehensive views can sometimes be justified by appeal to children's 'neutral' interest in developing autonomy, so does not violate any anti-perfectionist constraint.

We find Cormier's paper elegant and congenial. Much of it is a critique of Matthew Clayton's view on these issues, and we look forward to his response. But reflecting on her anti-perfectionist defence of our position has led us to identify some lack of clarity in one aspect of the view as presented in our book.<sup>11</sup> In *Family Values* we argue that parents have an obligation to shape some of their children's values –

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<sup>11</sup> We owe our awareness of this possible difficulty also, and separately, to Norvin Richards (2016) and discussion with Matthew Clayton.

those that will enable and incline them to treat others justly, and to behave well as citizens. This obligation, and the content of the values, is entirely independent of the values that parents distinctively hold. But parents also have a limited right to shape their children's values in ways that reflect their own. The right is limited primarily by a concern for the child's interest in developing autonomy, the facilitation of which is also a parental obligation. That right is our focus here. The argument we present grounds the right in familial relationship goods and appeals primarily to the importance, for children, of parents' being free to be spontaneously intimate and to share themselves with their child: part of feeling free to be spontaneous is not engaging in the excessive self-monitoring that would be required to shield the child from all one's interests and values. But we also defend some deliberate shaping of children's values, where that is necessary for the development and maintenance – including maintenance into adulthood - of an intimate familial relationship. Such a relationship requires at least some shared distinctive values, which in the early part of childhood, at least, will typically come from the adult.

Cormier argues that this second, deliberate, class of value-shaping can be defended on anti-perfectionist grounds where it is necessary for the kind of familial relationship that is itself conducive to children's developmental interests, most notably their interest in developing autonomy. She thinks that children would retrospectively consent to having their values deliberately shaped where that is the case. Indeed, she canvasses the further possibility that parents' enrolling children into their own comprehensive doctrines may itself be defended in this way.

To clarify the issues raised by her paper, note that there are key differences, some of which are obscured rather than clarified by our discussion in the book (Brighthouse and Swift 2014, pp. 154-157), between (i) parents' *spontaneously*



sharing/revealing their values, (ii) parents' *deliberately* sharing/revealing their values, and (iii) parents' deliberately *aiming to influence* their children's values. Taking one's child to church can be a deliberate way of introducing them to a belief system and a set of practices that one judges valuable and wants to share with one's children but, in principle at least, it need not involve any attempt deliberately to influence the values they come to hold; it need not be a deliberate attempt to get them to endorse Christianity. It is, to be sure, deliberate rather than spontaneous. But the aim is, or can be, merely that of revealing who one is to - sharing one's enthusiasms with - one's children. There need be no intention to guarantee, or even to increase the likelihood of, their coming to endorse those values.

Of course, *all* these classes of parent-child interaction will have the *effect* of shaping children's values. And even in class (ii), the parent might presumably *hope* that the child will come to endorse the values that the parent is revealing to her. Indeed, as Weinstock emphasizes, one may worry about the autonomy-inhibiting impact of all three classes, with serious repercussions for the parental duty of care to facilitate children's autonomy. But, bracketing that concern, the difficult question raised by Cormier's argument concerns which of them can be really be justified by appeal to familial relationship goods and the developmental interests that they serve.

How should we think about cases of the kind she describes here?:

For some parents – perhaps especially religiously committed parents – comprehensively enrolling their children, e.g. by baptizing them, bringing them to church and teaching them the value of things like spirituality, or family ties, or love, as they understand it in light of their religious view, may not only be an important source of fulfillment and joy, but also a key and indispensable element of what it means for them to be authentic in building a connection with their children. (xx)

One might consider a parent who can only connect authentically with her child by engaging in these kinds of interaction to have misunderstood the duties of parenthood.

That would be analogous to our view that a parent who cuts off relations with a child who rejects the parent's religion has misunderstood her role (Brighthouse and Swift 2014, p.157). In such cases, familial relationship goods are at the mercy of whatever parents need to connect authentically with their children, which may be true empirically but is problematic as a justification of the interaction. We can indeed imagine a child saying to her parent: 'I understand why you brought me up to believe in the Bible. Given your beliefs, that was the only way for us to have the kind of close loving relationship I needed to have with you if I was going to develop the autonomy I am now able to exercise (and which I exercise by rejecting Christianity)'. But it is hard not to think that there is something wrong with the parents' beliefs in that case. Just as, on our view, parents can enjoy loving familial relationships with their children without acting on their entirely natural desire generally to confer (unjustly advantageous) benefits on them, so, perhaps, they can enjoy such relationships without acting on their desire, perhaps also entirely natural, to try to get their children to endorse the same values as them. A fuller exploration of these issues would – we hope will – take another paper, exploring, in addition to the distinctions set out above, the differences between (a) revealing one's values, (b) getting one's children to participate in practices implied by those values, and (c) attempting to influence the values that one's children endorse, whether during their childhoods or as the adults they will become.

In the book we frequently deploy a distinction between what people should be permitted to do *qua* parents, *on family values grounds*, and what they should be permitted to do *all things considered*. To the frustration of those quite reasonably interested in the latter issue, our focus is the former; we are concerned specifically with those parent-child interactions that are 'susceptible to justification by appeal to

the parent-child relationship' (Brighouse and Swift 2014, p.146).<sup>12</sup> So it is not altogether surprising that our theory supports only a right to do those things that are necessary in order for the relationship to flourish. Still, the amount of sharing that is necessary might be considerable. And it is worth remembering that a good deal of deliberate value-shaping – that required to ensure that the children will grow up with a sense of justice – is obligatory. Success in *that* value-shaping task probably takes a good deal of intimacy and connectedness between parents and children, especially in social contexts where justice values are not well supported by the broader, extra-familial, environment: the showing of examples, modelling of behaviour, and exposure to other models of behaviour, might be more effective in the context of shared 'discretionary' valuing. And, as long as it is consistent with the development of the child's autonomy, more sharing, and perhaps even intentional shaping, might be legitimate on other grounds that we do not consider.

Weinstock notes that our commitment to the prospective autonomy of the child limits the ways in which parents may deliberately shape their children's values, and even the spontaneity with which they may share them. He takes us to hold that parents should not 'exert emotional pressure' on their children, pointing out that:

a parent who in the presence of her children displays enthusiasm and passion in engaging in the activities that she finds valuable is, by this very fact, exerting emotional pressure upon her children. If her relationship with her children is healthy, then they will tend to be emotionally disposed to find pleasing the things their parents take pleasure in. When parents act on this disposition, whether they do so intentionally or not, they are exercising emotional pressure. And yet they are doing something that would seem to be called for by the theory of familial intimacy under discussion. (xx)

We agree, and say so (Brighouse and Swift 2014, pp.172-173). Our claim about emotional pressure is specifically that the complex and burdensome duty that parents

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<sup>12</sup> Brighouse and Swift (2015) offers further clarification of the specificity of our concerns.

are under with respect to value sharing and value-shaping includes ‘restraining themselves from exerting the emotional pressure that they may be tempted deliberately to impose on the child to refrain from revising her received commitments’ (173). Some degree of pressure is indeed surely unavoidable. When it comes to a love of cricket, or an enthusiasm for hip-hop music, it is not at all hard to imagine a parent who sincerely and in good faith will not have the slightest disappointment if her child fails to come to share that love or enthusiasm. But that attitude is more difficult to adopt in the case of religious or political values and commitments. And even in the former case, even emotionally well-balanced children may well anticipate, contrary to fact, that rejection of the enthusiasm will provoke disappointment.

Weinstock (xx) claims that ‘this juggling act between intimacy and autonomy’ is not required of families:

We need not look to just one institution, such as the family, as the *sine qua non* of the child’s autonomy. We need not impose upon it the responsibility of ensuring that the children that are raised within it are raised autonomously. Nor do we need to overtax the state’s capacity by requiring that in the name of the autonomy of children it observe the ways in which they are raised by parents in the intimate sphere. Nor need the state stand ready to intervene in that sphere when children are subject to value-shaping which, though it cannot be qualified as brainwashing or rank manipulation, may perhaps be viewed as excessive from the point of view of a parenting ethics that requires of parents that they attend both to ensuring that familial relations are characterized by the requisite degree of intimacy, and that it be a locus for the teaching of autonomous-decision-making.

The solution, for him, lies in state-regulated, autonomy-promoting schools. These need not teach the value of autonomy directly; it is enough that they meet the negative condition of ‘not simply being extensions of the values around which the familial domain is organized’ (xx).

Again, we agree with much of this; we never suggest that it is parents’ responsibility, on their own, to ensure their children’s autonomy. Indeed, one of us

(Brighouse 1998, 2005, 2006) has argued extensively that schools play a valuable, maybe essential, role in facilitating children's autonomy, even for families that are entirely committed to their children's autonomy, and that a key feature of an autonomy-facilitating school will be an ethos which is somewhat 'discontinuous' from that of the home and the mainstream culture. It is through schooling that the state is most easily able to supply the raw materials needed for autonomy: through the curriculum and high quality instruction children can experience intellectual and emotional encounters with ideas, values, and traditions that are different from, and sometimes conflict with, those they are raised with in the home. Perhaps more importantly, in a socially and culturally diverse school they can become acquainted with different ideas, values and traditions through the friendships they make and through intimate interactions with their friends' families. A culturally diverse teaching force can provide children with a range of adult role models who are unlike them and whom they can come to admire. A robust and well-designed extra-curriculum can lead them to discover enthusiasms and interests that would never have been stimulated by their home culture.

Still, we sound a couple of notes of caution. The first is simply that one should not overestimate the state's capacity to provide the kind of schooling that will facilitate autonomy, even for children whose parents are not hostile to it, let alone for those whose parents resist their development as independent persons. In any society that values autonomy, consumer choice is likely to play a considerable role in the allocation of various goods, including housing and schooling, and markets are liable to play a large role in the allocation of jobs. This can make it very difficult to achieve a mix of cultures within schools, either among the staff or among the students, especially (but not only) in areas with lower population density. Even when cultural

diversity among the student population is achieved, children's tendency to prefer to socialize with others who pretty much like them makes it difficult to harness that diversity as an aid to autonomy, which may often reasonably be a lesser priority than improving students' academic outcomes. Teachers tend to mirror the general population in terms of their political, religious, and cultural outlooks, so it is not surprising that in many schools the ethos is not at all discontinuous with the culture of that of most of the homes of the students who attend. Equipping teachers with the skills necessary for teaching basic mathematics, science, and reading is already a difficult task. Equipping them to enable children to reflect critically and well not only on the values they have been raised with but also on the, possibly autonomy-eroding, values that permeate the mainstream ethos of modern capitalist societies – which many of those teachers unreflectively endorse – is more challenging still.

The second note of caution is that, however useful a political philosophy of parent-child relationships might be, an ethics of parent-child relationships remains essential. Even high quality schooling for autonomy would not eliminate the 'juggling act between intimacy and autonomy' that Weinstock seems to think that we can avoid requiring of families. Parents who are determined to resist autonomy can adopt strategies to immunize their children from the autonomy-promoting lessons and experiences that the school provides. Those strategies may sometimes fail, but they will succeed often enough for parents' choices about how to respond to schools' attempts to promote critical reflection on the values they themselves hold to remain important. Even where parents make no deliberate attempts at immunization, the emotional pull of their parents' enthusiasms will be enough to prevent many children from responding to the schools' messages. This is especially likely if parents take the awareness that another institution is taking care of autonomy as entitling them to be

completely uninhibited in their promotion of their own values. And because, as Weinstock acknowledges, it is important that schools not damage healthy familial relationships, the autonomy-promoting role of schools itself places limits on what parents may teach children at home. So consider the parents who, thinking themselves freed from the responsibility for promoting their child's autonomy by the presence of an autonomy-facilitating school, teach her that homosexuality, or apostasy, are sins punishable by eternal damnation. One can easily imagine that what the school would have to do to facilitate that child's autonomy would interfere with the familial relationship. We see no way that parents can be relieved of the duty to participate conscientiously in developing their child's autonomy.

If that is right, then we have to accept that parents have obligations that the state cannot enforce. We agree with Weinstock (xx) that 'the line distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable kinds of value-forming would simply escape states' epistemic capacity, even for states that had eschewed liberal democratic concerns with excessive surveillance of its citizenry'. For us, the importance of intimacy within the parent-child relationships means that parents must be given space within which they can, in fact, fail to deliver on their duties. We do not see a way around this.

### **Procreation and childhood**

We hardly discuss procreation in *Family Values*. We argue that adults have an interest in *parenting*, explain what that interest consists in, and claim that it is weighty enough to support a *prima facie* right to parent. We assume a continuing supply of children needing parents, and that childhood is a natural biological condition with the properties that enable adults to realize the interest in parenting, and through which all human beings lucky enough to reach adulthood will pass. But we do not even argue

that procreation is ever justified, all things considered. If, for example, we agreed with David Benatar (2008) that most lives are not worth living, because they contain more bad than good for the people living them, we would think that was a strong reason for most people not to procreate, despite the interest in parenting. We do not agree with him about that. More particularly, because we do not claim that the adult interest in parenting includes the interest in parenting a genetic descendent, we do not argue that adults are justified in procreating in order to fulfil their own interest in parenting.

Sarah Hannan and R.J. Leland are therefore not criticizing us directly when they challenge the view that the interest in parenting is strong enough to establish a right to procreate. But their argument is implicitly critical of us for the tacit assumptions we make about childhood: that it is a stage of life, that is usually, or at least often, well worth experiencing and going through. This gives us an opportunity to discuss further the nature of childhood, and its relationship to the interest in parenting.

Hannan and Leland observe that for adults to fulfil the interest we describe in parenting a child they need to be supplied with beings with certain features: viz, impaired practical reason, a need for extensive parental control, profound and asymmetric vulnerability, and no established practical identity. We agree. Hannan and Leland claim, though, that these are bad-making features of a life and, in particular, that possessing these features is bad for children. Because they are bad for children, the adult interest in relationships with beings that possess these features cannot form the basis of a justification for procreation, let alone of a right to procreate. But we think several responses are available to someone who, unlike us, wanted to use the adult interest to play that justificatory role.



The first would be to concede that the features of childhood to which they point are, indeed, bad, but observe that the parent's job is to deliver children from that condition. On this view it would be a matter of good fortune that the purportedly bad-making features of childhood make parenting distinctively rewarding, because this gives children a reasonably reliable way of escaping it. We give considerable emphasis to the interest parents have in raising children to become autonomous, independent adults, and the distinctive challenge posed by that particular task. For adults to enjoy the goods of parenting, those who are parented must have the capacity, if the role is discharged only reasonably well, to develop into adults whose practical reasoning is mature, who no longer need parental control and are no longer profoundly or asymmetrically vulnerable and who have a well-developed practical identity. An important part of what it is to realize the interest in parenting is to oversee the child's development to this adult state. Parenting, on our stipulation, is not a matter of caring for someone who lacks the capacity to develop into an adult: the role is to oversee that development.

As they figure in our account of the value of parenting, the purportedly bad-making features of childhood are, then, temporary, transient and necessary steps on the path to adulthood. So creating a child whom one knows will have these purportedly bad-making features with the reasonable expectation that they will be transcended through the process of parenting is quite different from producing a child that one knows will never develop into adulthood, and that one will control it for all of its life. To do *that* would indeed be to treat those features of childhood that make it bad for children as one's reason for procreation. But the interest in parenting is not simply an interest in exploiting the bad-for-children properties for one's own sake. It

is an interest in being the person who has the kind of relationship with the child that serves his interest in becoming an adult.

A second, and related, response would insist that, for us, the adult interest in parenting is misunderstood if it is conceived primarily as an interest in having control over another being, or in having another being dependent on oneself. Its core is an interest in a particular kind of loving relationship: a unique combination of intimacy and fiduciary authority. It is *what* children need from parents if they are to develop into adults that makes parenting distinctively and importantly valuable for adults. Children need ‘a special kind of *relationship* – a relationship in which the adults offers love and authority, a complex and emotionally challenging combination of openness and restraint, of spontaneity and self-monitoring, of sharing and withholding. It’s that kind of relationship that adults have an interest in too’ (original emphasis Brighouse and Swift 2014, p.93). Anyone who parents, or procreates, simply so that she can exercise control over a dependent has got something very badly wrong.

But we want to respond a bit more forcefully by doubting that the features of childhood that make a parental relationship with a child valuable for adults are, in fact, bad for children. On the contrary, we suggest that these are good-making features, both for the child during her childhood and for the adult she will become.

It would be nice to frame our discussion of these features in terms of the ‘childhood goods’ or the ‘special’ or ‘intrinsic’ goods of childhood that they make possible (Brennan 2014; Gheaus 2015a, 2015b). We lack, alas, the control to do that well, partly because we are not yet clear on how that category is best understood. Are they those features and goods, possessed by or available to children but not adults, that are intrinsically valuable for children – i.e. good for children during their

childhoods, irrespective of any instrumental or developmental benefits? The test for those would be to consider whether someone who died on the cusp of adulthood had benefitted from having the properties in question. Or are they those features and goods, possessed by or available to children, but not adults, that are valuable for people to have as children because they make possible the kind of development that is good for the adults they become? In practice, we suspect, many such properties and goods are both; for example, it is good for adults that they were unselfconsciously playful as children – it enabled the kind of development that benefitted them as adults – but unselfconscious playfulness is ‘intrinsically’ good for children too (i.e. it is good for them even if they are not lucky enough to live to become the adults who would have benefitted from being playful children).

That said, let’s start with dependence on another person for having one’s needs met and the necessity of parental control. After a long period of independence such a situation might indeed be undignified, or frustrating. But for a child, at the beginning of a full life, it enables her to enjoy experiences that would otherwise be unavailable or, perhaps, only insecurely available. Children can be – and many are, at least in reasonably favourable circumstances – carefree in a way that adults typically cannot. That experience – of going through a day without worrying about one’s own future, one’s responsibilities to others, the horrors one will encounter in the world beyond – is precious, and is facilitated by being in the state of vulnerability that makes one need loving, caring, and stable parental control. One of the reasons, furthermore, why that experience is so rare in adulthood is that our established practical identities involve us in a web of mutual responsibility; for the flourishing adult who relates successfully to others’ carefreeness must be rare and fleeting, precisely because it is a holiday from her practical identity.

Like dependence, children's being 'primed' for spontaneous and unconditional trust and love enables them to enjoy experiences that are unavailable later in life, once one has got the measure of the world and all its possible disappointments. The child who, without self-consciousness and with complete spontaneity, dances when a parent returns from a short trip and then throws himself into a hug is experiencing something distinctively valuable that is only possible due to the character of his love.

Now think about the alleged defect of lacking an established practical identity. This feature of childhood is a precondition for the good of *developing an established practical identity*. As children and adolescents we undergo a large and complex variety of learning experiences, including the gradual discovery of what our interests are, of what we are truly like, of what other people are like and how to read them well, of intense bouts of friendship some of which, even if brief, have lifelong impacts on us, of discovery of features of the world that are fascinating, or dreary, or sublime. Throughout childhood we have innumerable learning experiences, some distressing, many challenging, and many more intensely rewarding (including many of those that are also distressing and challenging). These all contribute to the development of a practical identity and would be different, and in many cases less valuable, experiences if we already had one. In adulthood we (usually, more or less) know who we are and allow our interests and identities to filter out important features of the natural and social world. We wear blinkers because we are no longer embarked on a journey of discovery while mapping the world and finding our place in it; though revising our views of course remains possible, as adults what we are usually doing is more like finding and following directions to where we want to go. That experience – the mapping of the world – is impossible if we already have an established practical identity.

Try to think, now, about the alternative: entering the world *with* an established practical identity. In fact, as we'll suggest later, we're not sure we can make sense of this possibility for beings like us. But in so far as we can, the established practical identity would have to be given, either by some creator, or by nature. In either case, there is an important sense in which it would not be ours. Our practical identities become ours – and established as ours – through a process in which we experience and interact with countless environmental influences and other persons, some of which touch us profoundly, others of which barely touch us, and many of which fall somewhere in between. Exactly how each interaction influences us is affected by what else has happened, by what the other influences have been and will be, and by the character of our, particular, embodied, emerging practical identity. What enables us to be autonomous is that our practical identities are not given by a creator, by our parents, or by nature, but develop and are established through childhood and into adulthood, as well as being revised through our adult lives.<sup>13</sup>

Even impaired practical reason is valuable. Patrick Tomlin (2016) amusingly speculates that we might feel sorry for children because they are both so pleased, and so upset, by things that just do not matter. But while we would – and do – indeed feel sorry for adults afflicted with that tendency, we are inclined rather to envy children's capacity to be so affected by trivial things. To be so readily distressed might, taken on its own, be regrettable, even for a child, but to be so easily thrilled and joyful seems to us fortunate. To be sure, there might be children who are *so* quickly prone to excessive emotional reactions that they would be better off on a more even keel – if only because such a disposition is tiring and liable to get in the way of other valuable elements in their lives. But, assuming that the capacity for irrational suffering and joy

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<sup>13</sup> For a related view see Weinstock (2016), which we inexcusably came across too late to learn from in this paper.

come together as a package, we are generally inclined to envy children their capacity rather than feel sorry for them.

Somebody might object that we romanticize childhood – either here, or in our book. But we don't. Childhood is marked by features that are valuable at that stage in life, both because they make possible valuable experiences during childhood and because they are developmentally valuable; we have particularly emphasized the development that makes our established practical identities our own. But, of course, the valuable experiences and development these features facilitate depend on the cooperation of the world. Being dependent on adults for one's wellbeing is bad for you if no adult cares to, and is competent to, look after you. The seriously impaired rationality of a toddler can be *disastrous* in a world of unfenced precipices and inattentive adults.

A final comment. It is tempting to think about the issue of whether childhood is bad for children by asking whether it would be better for human beings to emerge into the world as fully formed adults. Hannan and Leland invite this question with their example of Dr. Frankenstein's creation, Monstra. Monstra could have been created as a fully formed adult, but Frankenstein chose instead to endow her with a nature such that she would go through a lengthy period of child-like dependence in order to provide him with a parent-like experience.

In so far as we can make sense of the question we don't think it would be better for human beings to emerge into the world as fully formed adults. But we resist the question. As our discussion above indicates, we are not sure what it would mean to be an agent, or to have an established practical identity, if one emerged into the world as an adult. Human beings – the kinds of beings for which all of the resources of moral theorizing that we know of have been developed – are organic. They emerge

into the world helpless, and their development into adulthood involves physical, cognitive, and emotional growth in an appropriately nurturing and cooperative environment. They enter adulthood endowed with knowledge, skills, dispositions, attitudes, relationships and memories that have developed over the course of their childhood through interactions with the world beyond their bodies. These attributes, including the relationships and memories, are not incidental to their selves, but partly constitutive of them. While we have played along with the thought that persons might be able to avoid childhood and its purportedly bad-making features for the sake of arguing that those features are not, in fact, bad, we are not sure that we can really make sense of it.

## **Conclusion**

It's true that we have more to say. But we make no pretense that only considerations of space have prevented us from providing better responses to the six papers assembled in this special issue. We have been given much to ponder, and have been prompted to engage with difficult and complex issues, some of which had been more or less consciously sidestepped or pushed under the carpet, some of which had never occurred to us. Properly to engage with the full range of questions raised by our critics will take not only more words but also a good deal more work. We are extremely grateful to all the contributors, both for their careful attention and for pressing us to wade into deeper waters. We hope to come up with more satisfactory answers in due course.

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